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Scientific UFO flap

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Believers have a solid case; skeptics, too

By MELVIN MADDOCKS
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IN A DAUMIER CARTOON titled "The Comet of 1857" a thin-faced man with squinting eyes wearing a nightcap — a sort of French Stan Laurel — sits bolt upright in bed, staring out his window. Beneath the cartoon the line reads: "He believes he sees it."

The line might just as well have read: "He believes he doesn't see it."

The point is, in this early UFO cartoon Daumier has noted a fact that still needs emphasis — the predisposition of the eye to see (or not to see) what it expects, and even what it chooses.

At the time "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" was first sweeping the country, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, director of the Center for UFO Sightings in Evanston, Ill., remarked: "I hope the movie will reduce the threat of ridicule — that it will make people feel it is safe to report a UFO."

After "Close Encounters" the number of letters reporting phenomena of one sort or another to the Center for UFO Sightings rose from about 50 a day to nearly 800. So Dr. Hynek was proved right — or was he?

PHILIP J. KLASS, author of "UFOs Explained," a party-pooper where UFOs are concerned, examined the same situation

and arrived at an opposite conclusion. He too predicted the number of UFO reports would rise astronomically after "Close Encounters." But this, he argued, would only prove that UFO-sighting was a form of mass hysteria — a psychic epidemic.

Even when it comes to figures, the UFO-inclined and the UFO-disinclined see different sights. Dr. Hynek and his colleagues, conceding that 90 to 95 percent of UFOs can be explained, keep their eyes on the 5 to 10 percent they assume cannot be explained. The unpersuaded tend to believe that if 95 percent of the UFOs can be explained, so could the other 5 percent if only the investigators would press more vigorously.

Thus both sides in the controversy present themselves as being the more scientific. In typical confrontations the UFOlogists have compared their detractors to those who refused to look through Galileo's telescope, fearing that what they would see might threaten their belief systems.

On the other hand, the skeptics, demanding hard evidence, have compared UFOlogists to those who believe in spiritualism, no matter how many mediums are caught knocking on their tables.

A POLL OF THE 2,611 members of the American Astronomical Society is seen as a victory by UFOlogists because only 3

percent believe UFOs are not worth investigating.

But the skeptics see the poll as their vindication because only 3 percent of the astronomers at the other extreme believe the UFOs are flying saucers, or extraterrestrial life. Another scientific standoff!

People pretend to be objective, but, like Daumier's comet-spotter, most people — often for subtle and complex reasons — want to believe that UFOs exist, or do not exist. Belief or disbelief in UFOs makes alliances with all sorts of other beliefs and attitudes in an individual's life.

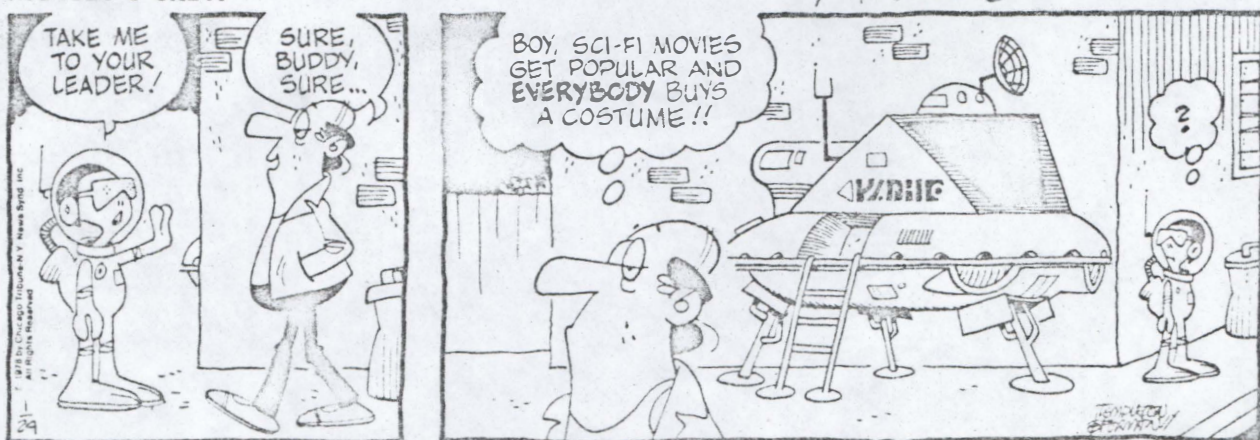
WHEN WILL WE DO justice to what is human in science?

For all their famous laid-back neutrality in the presence of their data, scientists, like the rest of us, become winners or losers on the basis of the theory they commit themselves to. And then they double their bet by trying to convert others.

If there are (or if there are not) flying saucers — if the home team wins or the home team loses — Saturn will still spin in its orbit, the sun will rise, somewhere the skylark will sing. But, for a while at least, don't expect the Daumier man to care.

The universe has shrunk to become the size of his claims about it, and he will notice nothing unless it answers the question: "Did I see it? Am I right?"

MOTLEY'S CREW



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